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ABSTRACT

The weaknesses of standardized testing are apparent in assessing student achievement in the social studies. State mandated criterion referenced tests, aligned with objectives on the state level, may be better for assessing social studies achievement, but they also have weaknesses. The development of portfolios has been an attempt to compensate for the weaknesses of standardized tests and state mandated tests. Whatever the method chosen, the goals that students are to achieve need frequent assessment. To achieve these worthwhile goals, students need to have quality activities and experiences. It is also important to assess the organizational structure of the social studies curriculum, focusing on separate subjects, a correlated approach, fused procedures that link all the social science disciplines, and an integrated academic curriculum that uses problem solving situations. (SLD)

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Assessing Student Achievement in the Social Studies

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ASSESSING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Standardized tests are given in most states to measure student achievement. These tests then are to ascertain how well learners are achieving. To measure one academic area, such as the social studies, limits the scope of measuring achievement. Standardized tests measure learner progress in all major curriculum areas to obtain a global overview of how well students are doing. Standardized tests have the following weaknesses, among others:

1. They provide a single numerical result only, such as a student's percentile ranking.
2. They are given once a year or less frequently.
3. They lack validity in terms of covering what was taught in the classroom.
4. They provide feedback to teachers and students who took the test in a very limited way.
5. They do not provide for individual differences, among test takers, taking the test. All are to conform to the directions given in the manual for test administration.

State mandated tests will tend to measure social studies achievement more effectively as compared to a standardized test. There will definitely be a major component in the state mandated test which will emphasize the social studies. The scope or breadth of social studies content may vary from state to state. Generally, major emphasis in the tests will pertain to history and geography. Although, political science and economics may also be incorporated. Anthropology/sociology should be inherent in these tests, but are rarely incorporated.

State mandated tests are aligned with the objectives, also developed on the state, not local, level. The validity of the state mandated tests should be thorough if aligned with the objectives of instruction. Reliability should also be strong be it split/half, test/retest/or alternate forms. Too frequently, quality validity and reliability are lacking due to haste in developing the state mandated tests. Pilot studies should always be used to make a test increasingly valid and reliable.

State mandated tests have the following weaknesses which need remediation:

1. They tend not to carefully sample test items from the different academic disciplines of history, geography, political science, economics, as well as sociology and anthropology.
2. They tend to be vaguely written due to a lack of pilot testing of inherent multiple choice test items.

Development of portfolios has been an attempt to minimize weaknesses of state mandated tests. Students with teacher guidance select which items from daily work should go into a portfolio for the individual learner.

Portfolios represent a purposeful collection of daily classroom work completed by the student. A portfolio may then contain:

1. Written work.
2. Projects completed. If these are large, a snapshot will do, to be placed in the portfolio.
3. Construction items in snapshot representation.
4. Cassette recordings of oral work.
5. A video tape involving the student in committee endeavors.

The portfolio is open to parent viewing and observation. The contents may be discussed with the teacher to indicate achievement and what is left to learn.

The social studies curriculum and its inherent parts need a thorough assessment. Improvement in the social studies should accrue, based on assessment results.

ASSESSING THE SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

School personnel need to assess the social studies frequently in order to secure the best objectives, learning opportunities, and evaluation procedures. There are a plethora of facets which need evaluation. Which of these should receive primary emphasis in the social studies?

Goals in the Social Studies

Goals which students are to achieve need frequent assessment. Why? An updated social studies curriculum is necessary. As society changes, so should the social studies also change. There are numerous changes in world leaders, new nations being established, wars fought, and disasters within/between nations. Thus, the goals of instruction need to be studied and a new emphasis established. Also, the following are added or recommended as additions to the social studies: character education, civic responsibility, racial acceptance in multicultural education, as well as democracy as a way of life.

Each goal needs to be assessed carefully in terms of worth. Adequate deliberation must be in the offing.

Activities and Experiences

To achieve worthwhile goals, students need to have quality activities and experiences. Each of these needs to be assessed in terms of:

1. Providing for the interests of learners.
2. Assisting students to perceive reasons for learning.

3. Helping students attach meaning to ongoing lessons and units of study.

4. Engaging learners when providing for individual differences.

5. Involving learners in self-evaluation to reflect upon what has been achieved.

Rating scales, checklists, and journal entries may be used to assess each of the five enumerated items by using a Lickert five point scale.

Organizing the Social Studies

There are several procedures available to assess organizational structure. The way of ultimate organizational plan used depends upon which:

1. Plan assists students to achieve more optimally.

2. Plan helps learners to retain subject matter and skills effectively.

3. Plan is preferred by students when teacher/learner planning is used to develop the social studies curriculum.

4. Plan involves critical and creative thinking, as well as problem solving in an increased way.

5. Plan inculcates more positive student behaviors.

The author suggests social studies instructors analyze in depth, each of the following to ascertain the best approach in organizing the curriculum:

1. Separate subjects. Here the social studies teacher may teach history, geography, political science, anthropology/sociology, and economics, each as separate units of study. Or, within a unit, history, for example, may be taught separately from the other academic social science disciplines.

2. Correlated approach. The social studies teacher then teaches two academic disciplines as being related such as history and geography.

3. Fused procedures. The social studies teacher here teaches all social science academic disciplines in an interrelated manner. None are taught as being isolated entities.

4. An integrated curriculum whereby all academic disciplines in the curriculum are emphasized in problem solving situations. Each problem tends to use subject matter which is important as solutions to the identified problems.

Local test results may provide data on which of the four ways of organizing the curriculum is best for optimal student achievement. Experimentation may be used in trying out in the classroom which of the four works best to help individual students learn as much as possible.